

# Advice for New Lawmakers

Seasoned legislators offer some words of wisdom for the freshman class.

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BY PEGGY KERNS

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**W**hen you walked through the state capitol doors for the first time as a “servant of the citizenry,” your emotions most likely ran high, with varying degrees of trepidation, excitement, confidence and anxiety all mixed together.

“I was awestruck, humbled and honored,” says Wyoming Representative Rosie Berger (R) about her first official day at the Capitol in 2003. “Then I felt energized. I was ready to roll up my sleeves and dig into the people’s work.”

Last November, Americans elected some 1,600 brand new legislators. Though many have served at local levels, a significant number are first-time elected officials. New or experienced, lawmakers are arriving at state capitols to take the oath of office in historic buildings where many have served before them.

At new-member orientations, you may have learned the ropes, ranging from where to park to the particulars of complex policy issues. You met colleagues and started building the relationships that are so crucial to being an effective legislator.

Learning the legislative landscape can be tough, however. It involves an entirely new world of different rules, different people and a somewhat different language. Remembering their roots, several seasoned legislators offer the following “what I know now that I wish I’d known then” advice.



## *Hold on to your values.*

Don’t lose sight of who you are. A good legislator is an ethical legislator who comes into office and leaves office with personal values intact. Follow your moral compass. Be honest and maintain your integrity. The legislature operates on truth and trust. Keep your word, it’s your biggest asset. Honor your commitments.

Many new legislators instantly feel more important than they ever thought they were. While fellow lawmakers may treat you as equals, attention from lobbyists and constituents may go to your head. Don’t let it. Remember, this exaltation is temporary and will disappear when you leave office. And keep your ambition in check. Focus on doing your job well, not your next political step.

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*“Remember, we are here for service,  
not for glory.”*

—COLORADO SENATOR NANCY TODD (D)



## *Play by the rules.*

Obedying the laws should be a given, yet most major ethics scandals happen because this advice is ignored. Still, being ethical is more than just obeying laws. When facing gray areas, often involving conflicts of interest, ask: Does this cross the ethical line? Find a mentor and seek his or her opinion.

Study your state’s constitution, the foundation of all your laws. Master your chamber’s parliamentary procedures and rules. Get a parliamentary manual, such as Mason’s Manual. Those who know the rules have a strategic advantage over others. House clerks, senate secretaries and seasoned legislators are excellent resources. Use them.

Follow the traditions and decorum of your chamber and the legislature. Keep debates civil. Don’t personalize disagreements. Respect other points of view. Be open to new information. Reach across the aisle. Despite the current wave of partisanship, most policy issues are not partisan. Cavort with the enemy! Remember, you no longer are campaigning, you are now governing.



## *Serve your constituents.*

Despite feeling “overwhelmed” during her first session in 2005, Colorado Senator Nancy Todd (D) distinctly remembers being “very aware of my obligation to serve the people.”

Learn early on what you can and cannot do to solve constituents’ problems. Ask them to send emails describing their concerns specifically to help you know where to find solutions. But don’t promise more than you can deliver. Know when to draw the line and where to send them for answers to keep from getting caught in the middle of issues between

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—INDIANA HOUSE SPEAKER BRIAN C. BOSMA (R)



constituents and agencies. And always follow through to make sure they were served.

Look for opportunities to engage citizens, for example, with invitations to a Day at the Capitol, surveys, newsletters and by attending community meetings. Write a column for your weekly newspaper or a blog, and send email blasts when a big vote is coming up. Schedule regular town meetings and coffee klatches at a local restaurant. Pop into local cafes. Keep this in mind: You were elected by a majority of voters, but you represent all citizens.

#### ★ 4 ★ *Get smart.*

Develop a specialty in a policy area that interests you and your constituents, or look to fill a void. Then team up with the experts. Give clear instructions to bill drafters, and examine the bills you introduce thoroughly, making sure your facts are correct. Focus on your committee work, since this is where the in-depth work on bills is done. Do your homework, and you'll build your credibility. Don't commit too early to other people's bills.

Understanding state budgeting is vital for all lawmakers, but different than anything you've encountered in the private sector.

### Words to Live By

- ◆ Stay humble.
- ◆ Be honest.
- ◆ Keep your word.
- ◆ Listen.
- ◆ Have a sense of humor.
- ◆ Be open to other points of view.
- ◆ Maintain a healthy lifestyle.
- ◆ Stick to your priorities.
- ◆ Stay true to your moral core.
- ◆ Use your time wisely.
- ◆ Focus on areas of highest interest.
- ◆ Fill a vacuum in a policy area.
- ◆ Be on time for meetings.
- ◆ Meet often with constituents.
- ◆ Don't always talk to the same people.
- ◆ Don't promise more than you can deliver.
- ◆ Know where to draw the line.
- ◆ Keep balance in your life.
- ◆ Don't neglect family and friends.

It is driven by service, not profit. Seek help in understanding the budget from staff and veteran legislators.

Speak out when necessary and relevant. Market your ideas to leaders, other members and the media. Listen to those with experience and expertise, including staff.

Build relationships with the media and lobbyists by being honest and forthcoming, and by avoiding any grandstanding. The press may want a good story, but you don't have to be the one to give it to them. Most lobbyists respect the legislative institution and want to protect it. Take advantage of their wealth of facts and information, but recognize they represent only one point of view.

#### ★ 5 ★ *Avoid freshman traps.*

Be aware of first impressions. Fair or not, opinions form early about what kind of legislator you will be. Too many freshmen introduce bills with great ideas of how to spend state money, but with no idea of where the money will come from.

“One of the hardest lessons for new legislators to learn is that long-term vision is the primary mover of policy success,” says Indiana House Speaker Brian C. Bosma (R). “Legislators tend to think in two-year terms and two-year budget cycles, but the greatest gains come when a long-term vision is consistently pursued.”

When taking positions and making decisions, draw a line between the needs of your constituents and personal relationships with colleagues and lobbyists. Avoid a quid-pro-quo mentality. Exchanging votes is banned in all legislatures.

### *Final Thoughts*

Leave the legislature as strong or even stronger than you found it. You are part of a special and distinguished group. Approach the job with humility, openness and an experience to be valued, and you will do well. Most of all, be grateful for the incredible opportunity and honor to serve the public.

“Find some quiet time to collect your thoughts and gain appreciation for your experience as a legislator,” says Berger. She goes early to the capitol and walks the vacant halls. “In the quiet of the morning, I absorb the history of the building. It reinforces why I chose to run and serve.”